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An assembled issue

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Three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds have been employed in various domains and have been a topic for investigation for a long time (e.g. Sturman, Zeltzer, & Pieper, 1989). Nevertheless, the papers chosen for this assembled issue of the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research all argue the need for further research into human engagement with virtual worlds and beyond a discussion of the affordances of virtual worlds and their limitations.

In the first section of this 'assembled' issue, the paper by Berndett Koles and Peter Nagy, and the study by Samara Anarbaeva discuss the creation and definition of individual identities in Second Life. Identity matters, or the ways to understand selves and others have been in the focus of research projects examining any type of human interaction, and residing, playing, and using virtual worlds are no exception.

Koles and Nagy present a quantitative study of the drivers for personal identity choices in the creation of Second Life avatars and they compare these with the identity choices made offline. The authors argue that the affordances of virtual worlds allow for more experimentation in the expression of identities, but that individuals are still guided by both public expectations, as well as influenced by their individual private histories. Virtual avatars are, therefore, not entirely dissociated from the offline identity of computer users, and choices in one 'area' affect the other as well.

Anarbaeva employs qualitative research methods to present a very personal look at the choices that individual users make when they first enter Second Life and illustrates the influence the personal histories have on the creation of identities through avatars. Through the use of an auto-ethnography methodology backed up by observations and interviews of other Second Life users, Anarbaeva argues that gender, race, and ethnicity choices made by individuals during the process of creating, styling, and accessorising their avatars reflect the opinions and desires of their offline presence or real-life identities.

Both these studies conclude that the complex interactions between identity choices made by individuals in offline and in online spaces deserve further scrutiny, as they allow for unique insights into processes of identity creation. The studies suggest that online and offline identities are intricately connected. Such findings agree with existing research on virtual identities (e.g. Baym, 2010; Nakamura, 2008): identity spills into both contexts – online and offline – thus merging them into fields where people present themselves, engage with the virtual context and other individuals. Such fields provide opportunities to present, maintain, and change representations of self seemingly and hopefully by choice and paradoxically limited by social conventions, habits, and past histories. The partly conscious, partly unconscious processes leading to the creation and styling of specific avatars online, and their comparison to the self-perception of the users' offline identity choices and past histories offer many promising avenues for future research.

The two papers in the second section of this issue provide analyses of the use of 3D virtual worlds in education. In the first paper, Sahoan Kim, Jiyeon Lee, and Michael Thomas analyse a sample of the research literature on the use of virtual worlds in education. David Herold in the second paper in this section discusses a recently concluded three-year project to promote the use of Second Life at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Kim, Lee, and Thomas provide an overview of research on the use of 3D virtual worlds in educational contexts, and conclude that despite increasing numbers of educational case studies, there is not much diversity in the types of applications, and the nature of research. They argue that most educational users employ virtual worlds merely as simulated spaces in which offline spaces are reproduced, and that research into the use of virtual worlds is largely descriptive rather than being analytical or experimental. As a further result of their study, they also argue that most educational users default to one particular virtual world, mostly Second Life, without considering alternative worlds.

David Herold analyses the introduction of Second Life in a Higher Education setting through the lens of his own experiences as the project team leader of the effort to create a virtual presence for the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He argues that the use of Second Life was less driven by educational goals or imperatives, but was instead the result of negotiations between those wishing to explore the exciting possibilities offered by this virtual world and those evaluating the use of Second Life as it reflected in the reputation of the university. The paper concludes by asking for more student and educator oriented research that would assess the value of virtual worlds in education.

Despite differences in their approach, both studies in this section argue for additional research in the use of virtual worlds in education and beyond developing case studies or exploring the potential of virtual worlds. There have been numerous studies covering these topics. Research should now move beyond them and investigate virtual worlds and their inter-relatedness with the offline world in much greater detail – a point also raised by the two papers in the first section.

The final paper in this assembled issue echoes the demands for more research into the affordances offered by virtual worlds by providing an overview of the existing research into the use of virtual worlds by people with disabilities. The author, Karen Stendal, argues that not enough research has yet been done on the usage and experiences of virtual worlds by people with disabilities. The paper outlines several areas for further research.

Despite differences in topics, style, and methodologies, all the papers in this assembled issue share the desire to see virtual worlds researched in far greater depth. Virtual worlds research, it appears from the papers in this issue, is still in its infancy. As these five papers highlight that role of virtual worlds in student experience, identity in virtual worlds, and use of virtual worlds by people with disabilities are some of the areas that require further investigation, experimentation, analysis, and discussion.

Users interact with virtual worlds in many different ways, some of which mirror their engagement with the offline world and offline society, while others offer alternatives to offline interactions, identities, relationships, beliefs, structures, thus affording researchers with new comparative perspectives. To use the terms of Claude Levi-Strauss as discussed by Jacques Derrida (1993), individual humans are choosing from a *bricolage* of pieces of personal convictions, histories, impressions, opinions, and experiences to assemble different, but inter-connected identities regardless of whether they are actively 'creating' an identity online in the form of an avatar, or 'living' one or more offline. Virtual worlds offer the user *bricoleur* additional venues to explore their own creative processes and afford them with the possibility to author or modify alternative discourses in contrast to those limited by nature, society, or culture norms. At the same time, researchers are presented with almost limitless permutations of possible research topics, subjects, and contexts that have barely been looked at, and much less exhausted.

Let the investigations begin...

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